WHIMSY AND DUTY

I write poetry because it’s not a grown-up activity. I like starting the day with paper and pen, before the world begins, linking words and phrases in childish ways. I like the rudimentary daring of toying with language, the fitting, re-fitting, knocking and tamping little globules of sound: phonemes, glottal stops, clauses, consonants, umlauts, and vowels. As a process it’s idle and willful at once. And not unlike fishing, as William Stafford observes, the writer teasing and tapping in the quiet near-dark, hoping something will bite, the imagination at work with body and faith to create a thing not yet imagined. I like noticing, too, as collisions occur, as sound and sense interfuse, that a design or pattern appears, or begins to appear, at which point the stakes are raised. A fish bites; the child’s game glows with destiny, purpose. Charles Simic, in his essay “Why I Still Write Poetry,” has compared writing poetry to chess, each process constituting a series of moves “in which every single move is of momentous significance.” As poets, of course, we’re not playing live, advancing and positioning words; we are, in a way, but only initially. We return to the draft again and again, revisiting real time to reveal and distill, trailing that original impulse to its inevitable, searing end: checkmate (a line or lines the child would have nailed had the adult not interfered).

In each case, each poem, there’s mystery, something to explore or unfold, if not comprehend. Dorianne Laux, in an interview with Front Porch, has said her first book began not so much as a collection of poems as “a need to understand the basic questions that all human beings ask: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? What is beauty? Why is there suffering?” Like Caedmon, and like Laux, who writes poems “to know the questions,” I measure what I know with what I don’t know, and can’t, sifting the rhythm and grit the world offers. Nonsense makes more sense than plain sense, I am finding these days. Questioning and measuring isn’t specific to poetry, of course, but given the constraints of fiction and nonfiction, exposition and story, poetry seems to me most suited to mystery. Its nature is wayward, disruptive, infantile, inherently revolutionary.

Writing poetry is for me an act of coherence. Of noticing what does and doesn’t conjoin, and allowing that to guide me, to arrange sound and sense to say what seems to need to be said. It’s about negotiating what I know concretely, here and now on earth in this form, with what I can’t possibly know, but sense, and know in my cells, and know again when I hear, baffling however the song is that appears. If this sounds like prayer, well—I guess that’s what it is. Kathleen Ossip, in her essay “Why I Write,” calls poetry writing “an intense mode of paying attention to (marvelous, delicious) words,” not unlike Zen meditation. Dorianne Laux writes “to concentrate, to feel a sense of purpose rise up,” guiding her in the framing of unanswerable questions. Finding voice and truth in a poem, I have found, involves an open-eyed, childish receptivity, the kind of attentive softness the monk maintains in zazen. In a world that seems daily less sane, bent on destroying itself, such truth is grace, I believe, at once a response to and a refuge from madness and a reminder that there’s more here than we see on the surface. For me, accordingly, writing is both whimsy and duty. If I can be remade by words, surely the world can be, too—and sanity and peace, surely, are catching.